

ASSEMBLY OF WORLD-WIDE CRCNA PARTNERS
Saturday, June 9, 2007

What we are Hearing: Patterns and Priorities for Ministry

Panelists: Michael Bruinooge, Mariano Avila, Ida Mutoigo, Setri Nyomi, and Paul Mpindi

Notes from Panelists:

The panelists have been asked to listen throughout the conference, read the summaries, take notes from the workshops they attend, and then summarize “what have we been hearing?” We’ll be hearing from them.

(Note: We want this to be a working conference – not just attending workshops with no next steps. Information from the workshops and plenary sessions will be made available online).

1. **Mariano Avila** – I asked missionaries, pastors, lay leaders, and seminary professors from Latin America four questions: Do you consider that the presence of ministry of North American missionaries is necessary in your country? Why? What kind of missionaries are needed? What is the best way in which our missionary agencies in North America can collaborate with Latin American churches?

Split results about whether we still need North American missionaries. Almost half said that we don’t need them anymore. Those who said “yes” cited the challenges of significant church growth in churches in Latin America and the large role they have to play. They mentioned also the mutual enrichment that comes from partnering together in this work. Please send your best missionaries and not just mediocre ones. We want true missionaries with vocation to serve.

Those who said “no” cited we don’t need them because they come with a messianic complex. They make themselves indispensable and make people depend on them. We have changed from being a mission field to being a mission agency. We have plenty of human resources – the church growth has been exponential. The enormous economic investments have produced poor results. Missionaries threaten national identity by imposing their own. Unless missionaries come in non-traditional roles (e.g. not heroes who are not responsible to locals). We don’t believe that they are the only bearers of truth. We don’t want them unless they are willing to have a mutual learning experience.

What kind of missionaries are needed: people who will be involved in theological education at the grassroots level, not bureaucrats, people who will go where no one else wants to go, computing education, short-term leadership, intensive training, don’t stay forever. Public relations – people who can serve as bridges between their countries and North American churches. People committed to our culture – who love those they serve. Those with a service attitude. Not short-term, first-class missionary tourists. Not laboratory missionaries who live isolated from others. Not proponents of an American worldview who want people to be like them.

The best way for North American agencies to collaborate with LA communities is by being partners, support as trainers not doing the job as missionaries, not imposing their own criteria, learning from local leaders, using resources for service not control, support the development and maturity of local churches, missionaries having a wide perspective of the world and church, less denominationalism and divisions, help us establish relationships between LA and NA churches, help us to establish connections with educational, technical resources.

Missionaries must be trained in the new realities of the majority world. Sometimes we still operate with an old mold. A broader multi-cultural perspective is essential for ministry. We need to learn from nationals on the field.

2. **Michael Bruinooge** – We have a denominational ministries plan. One of the objectives of that plan has two simple words “transcend boundaries.” This might not be immediately understandable to people. We’ll work with people to help CRC be a denomination that respects boundaries but is also able to transcend them. This includes being able to collaborate internally and externally to maximize learning. AWWP is connected to that. We are trying to listen and learn. Here are a few of the key things that I’ve heard:

- We need to live out our mission in community. It is our God who lives in community as the pattern for us in our Christian living – to live in community. This is especially relevant for our North Americans but for others as well.
- We need to learn together. Tribalism in some parts of the world is similar to racism in the US. We can learn together about some of these issues.
- Relationship is the main thing about being in community. Yes, we can accomplish more together, but the relationship is the way we give glory to God by being in mission together.
- We need to be transformed in order to be God’s agents of transformation. We have tendencies to live counter to what God is calling us to do in Scriptures with regard to our faith. We live with easy recognition of accommodating to power, comfort, consumerism, wealth, ambition, appearance, recognition. We find it hard to embrace suffering, risk. That is the model that Jesus has given to us. We need to put Christ first in all our circumstances. This is an ongoing process.
- How do we pass on our faith and passion to the young people in all of our cultures? They are easily trapped and lured away by what is ephemeral or materialistic.
- This conference was notable for not giving us easy or simple answers. It is notable for the questions that were asked. We are all on a journey of learning in community together. (e.g. how are our churches to include women’s perspectives in all our ministry and mission).
- We need the church as a church to play a lead role in reconciliation
- We need time for reflection, prayer, etc to consider the big questions that come up. We need this on an on-going basis.

3. **Paul Mpindi** – I want to raise issues so that we can think hard. What I heard I divided into two:

From Western Churches –

- Awareness of a paradigm shift from a know-it-all paternalistic approach to a more relational approach
- Western Church wants to listen, talk
- Willingness and readiness to listen to the real needs of third world countries and Christians
- Willingness to play an active role in issues of injustice and inequality; but you don't know how to do it. We appreciate your willingness.
- Trying to work very hard to relieve poverty. We appreciate it.
- Suffering from collective guilt. North Americans blame themselves for everything and I wonder why. You should feel 50% of the guilt, we should feel the other 50%.

From Third World churches –

- The sudden awareness of this new approach causes concern. We are suspicious – why did you change? Why do you care now?
- Why do you want to help us – is it because we are poor or because you want to share Christ and resources with us?
- What would be the partnership if third world countries became financially independent?
- Does Third World Christianity have something to offer Western Christianity? What is it?
- When you are a recipient you lose the responsibility of giving. You only know how to receive. We don't get to know the joy of giving.
- Is time for us to give you Jesus back in our way – if after 100 years we haven't received the gospel, you didn't do a good job.
- What if we removed money, things, and power from the relationship – what kind of partnership would we have with you? How would we work together?
- We need you – not because we want you - but because of what you have in your hands. That shouldn't be the foundation of missions. We should need you because we didn't know Jesus, you help us meet Him. Let's focus on Him. You stay with us and we'll both look at Him.

4. **Setri Nyomi** – I tried to focus what I have to say on what we've been hearing mainly in the presentations and the questions in the plenary sessions and some of the summaries of the workshops and some of the conversations in informal places.

- Stories of people's lives and engagements demonstrate that in the 21st century God continues to deliver his people in miraculous ways and equips and engages us in His mission. He calls us into partnership with each other.
- It is in our interest to hear those stories and be challenged by them and inspired by them.

- Listening to one another is very important for partnership in mission. It challenges us to be more faithful in our witnessing. It affirms in us that God has placed gifts in us for those involved in mission and to those who receive it. Learn from one another in neutrality.
- Emphasis on the fact that mission belongs to God. This should be kept at the focus of our ministry and how we engage with other people. Not just in our way but the way God calls us to. Keep Christ central.
- We can't do it alone. We need partners wherever we go. All of us have gifts (financial and other) that we bring to mission. These all belong to God who has called us to participate in mission.
- God uses unlikely persons, unlikely sources for his glory.
- We are called on to work in partnership with local people wherever we are engaged in mission.
- Mission and our work in partnership call us to focus on issues of justice and advocacy. We all live and work in areas where issues of justice are part of what we are called to do (race, economy, gender, etc).

5. **Ida Mutoigo** – Something that struck me as I thought about this conference was the theme of complexity. When we are doing missions it is a really complex thing. It is getting more complex as time goes on. We've had some good provocative questions that have highlighted those complexities. I want to make sense of the complexity. I believe God is a God of order – but he's also a God of diversity. We need to make it simple and manageable but also appreciate the many ways to live out our ministry and mission.

How about looking at some of the key factors that affect this complexity:

- Circles – circle in the center is ourselves (mission worker, leader). When we are Christians, we accept Christ who instills his spirit in us. He gives us a sense of vision/calling. We find ourselves not isolated but working in organization (church, Christian NGO, body of believers). We try to minister outside of ourselves in a community. That community is not just immediately around us but is also affected by a larger global environment. There are key challenges in each of these layers and levels.
 - Globalization
 - Pluralism
 - Consumerism
 - Many cultures meeting
 - Leadership styles
 - Politics
 - Disasters
 - Global warming
 - Injustice
 - Insecurity
 - Ideologies about who God is
 - Exclusivity
 - Misuse of power

- We've lost our connectivity. Relationships are disposable and that makes people disposable. There is a need for dialogue and balance.
- As much as I may want to change the world, if I'm not changed or transformed forget it. We need to be the change we wish to see in this world. The hardest thing to manage is myself. How do I accept God's grace and transformation in life? How do I become changed? How much is prayer a part of my life? How am I Christ centered? How are values shaping me?
- Prayer is central. That is where we need to go back to – how are we grounded in Jesus Christ. Are we asking for God's help? Are we being guided by His wisdom so we are able to discern His spirit in this age?
- How do I empower others and enable them to be responsible for choices about their lives?

Regional Groups

- A. **Youth** – Thanks for including us at this conference. It is beneficial for us. There is a ton of youth out there who are very interested in these types of issues. The development major program is growing and more people are asking about it every day. To meet people who are involved in these things in real life is invaluable. One thing we wanted to bring to attention is the great potential for the church to be a unifying and global presence on these types of issues. We are all representatives of the same body of Christ. That unification and strength is something important. Much can be achieved there. Development and missions at Calvin have always been very separate. “Missions” is seen as imperialism and is associated with a “messiah-mentality”. This has helped us realize that the two don't have to be separate they can be done together. I would recommend that any time you have a chance to talk to the younger generation, make sure that they understand that. Evangelism and empowerment can be one and the same. There is a call to action that is here. That is part of the reason that the younger generation is so interested in these issues is because we see this call to action, we want to act, we are willing and able, we need someone to give us the chance to act. (Jobs/internships/after college experience). Despite the complexity that can be really overwhelming and can make you feel that you can't do anything – there is a huge amount of hope that is here. Your experiences and thoughts give us hope.
- B. **Asia** – The learning here is not just North to South but South to South and South to North as well. You have a desire to learn from the “unlikely places” and that is appreciated. How can we take this learning further to the church, nation, and global level? Let's explore songs, dramas, and dances next time. Emphasis on partnerships not just being money and projects but human relationships. CRC needs to re-look at the importance of Christian education. Is that the future direction for the CRC? (encouraging more investment in that area) There are differences between people and cultures even within the South to South dynamics. Those need to be appreciated. The theme of transformation needs to happen individually but also within communities of faith.
- C. **Europe** – It is a blessing to be here with you. I have been reminded for a long time of the theme verses of this conference. The hardest thing we have experienced in Eastern

Europe is the change of mentality of worldview that needs to take place. A common thread between all the European countries represented here is the need to overcome the mindset that has been formed in us by communism. How do you do that? We need some sharing and exchanges of learning about how this is happening so that we can learn from each other and support each other. The former communist countries are afraid of transformation and power. How can you do transformation in a way that induces the deep rooted changes that need to take place? There is a need for increased collaboration – meaningful networking. What makes sense to do together? Church in community is a key for us in Eastern Europe. Churches have received their freedom and can express their Christianity, but in the European Union people are questioning where the place for God is. How can we make Christianity relevant in Europe? Is our evangelism holistic? Do people feel Christianity in our hospitals, our prisons, in the streets? Our challenge to the CRCNA is: how can we work in a meaningful and collaborative way to advance God's kingdom in Europe & Eastern Europe.

- D. **Latin America** – We feel that we have been isolated and distant from the reality of other continents and our lack of awareness about these other places has hindered our understanding of what they feel. This conference encourages us to take other cultures more into account and to be more willing to participate together. We also feel that God is calling us to work together in partnership and collaboration – not only financially, but also our gifts, ideas, and our best practices based on our own experiences. We also have the perception that North American churches have their way of thinking about how things should be done and don't always take into account the decisions of the Latin American churches. This conference has helped us discover the value of partnership and also discover that when we are willing to collaborate we can do many big things together. Mutual respect is essential for this partnership. There has also been a perception that North American churches have not supported enough the development of self-sufficiency in Latin American churches. But we also recognize that there was a perception among us that everything good comes from North America. We were also challenged – the first step is to come to awareness of all that we do have to contribute (gifts, experience, and ideas that God has given us). We also are called to take a new awareness to our brothers and sisters in the North so that you too may know what we have to contribute. This is a first step, but the question is “now what?” What are our next steps?
- E. **West Africa** – The spirit of the Lord is here. This conference has been about partnership. Words are just words until they are put into action. We wanted to demonstrate our partnership today in our presentation. We believe that as partners you have to be real honest with each other – know the limitations of each partners and value their assets and liabilities. Don't be ashamed of the bucket or bathwater you use every day. At this conference we found things that we want to change. We shouldn't be upset if there are things we want to clean up. That should make us happy. We need to define partnership (not just money transfer, let's be clear what we are bringing). We need mutual respect for our strengths and our shortcomings. We believe there is still a need for Western world partnerships in Africa with the understanding that the Africans will design the programs with the Western World coming alongside them. We also want intra-Africa partnerships. We have some good models. That leads us to networking (website, convergence). There

is a cost to partnership. You have to be patient. We need a Christian voice at all levels. The church in West Africa needs to unite and speak up about injustice and bad governance. Watch out for our terminology – maybe not corruption but injustice. How do we help people to change? Change in knowledge, attitudes, behavior. We need to work on human capital – more regional university level education that is culturally sensitive and world class. We need succession planning for when good leaders pass on. We need to strengthen existing institutions. We need to remind Africans that they can support institutions on their own continent. We need to equip African youth. We affirm the leadership from the South who participated at this conference. Let us be honest with one another in partnership – let's tell the truth and react as spiritual people when we are corrected.

- F. **North America** – Do it with us. Collaboration. Equal partnerships. We learn from each other about listening. Ministry happens in a place. What do we need to do to collaborate in our own contexts? How can we work together at all levels? Who should be at the table? Who are we excluding and not listening to? How do we keep the diaconal community development piece in this process? How do we translate what we've learned to our own church, community, and neighborhood? There is a need to redefine our definition of stewardship. It is usually a one-way transfer of goods from us to them. We need to change it to harnessing the goods and gifts in our own communities. If we do this we can move from doing “ministry to” to doing “ministry with”. A clear definition of terms (partnership, collaboration). We heard a request for us to ask for those to come and minister with us. There is a need for North American to come to an agreement about how we can do that. Workshops focused on content and information. More time on process would have been helpful so we could listen to each other. What are next steps? We can't have the answers if we aren't doing it in our own backyards? WE need to listen, learn, and do in loving, caring relationships.
- G. **East/South Africa** – Our personal view is that this week God has engaged us in discussion with him the issues that concern his people. God has been talking to us. A lot is left inside us that may never be written on these papers but they are written inside us. He has made all of us commonly see and given us common purposes. One thing that has come through clearly is his core part is his people. We bear his image. There has been a call for intense dialogue and improvement of what we are doing in relationship. God is calling us into relationship with Christ. If things are stemming from Christ our partnerships will bear fruit and achieve what God wants us to achieve. We should put relationships above resources. There is need for collective formulation of our partnerships and shaping of those partnerships. The ownership of such goals and activities will be carried with equal strength. We heard a call for the evangelical body to support justice. If one voice talks for justice he gets crushed. When the evangelical body stands together it will make a difference. We need to challenge the theological assumptions – don't take things for granted, logic and passion have to work together.